

Cyrus McCormick's great gift

By Editorial Research Reports

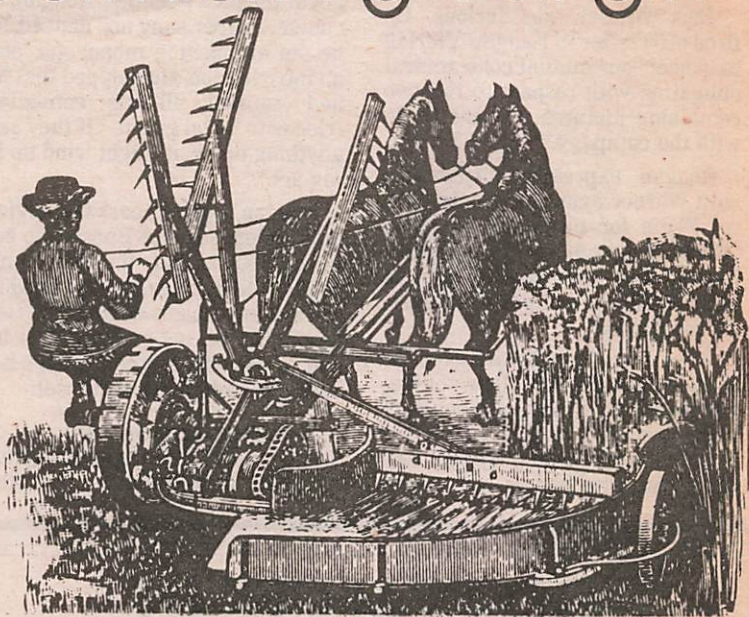
At Britain's Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, Samuel Colt displayed to the world his revolver and Cyrus McCormick his horse-drawn grain reaper. But only with the passage of time, and mainly in their home country, would these two instruments assume great importance.

It is hard to say which was more critical to the winning of the West, Colt's six-shooter or McCormick's mechanical harvester. McCormick first patented his reaper 150 years ago this year, which also is the centennial year of his death on May 13, 1884.

His horse-drawn machine used a reel to bring the grain against a reciprocating cutting blade, and a platform to catch the long stalks of grain as they were cut.

Eventually, it evolved into the combine, pulled by many teams of horses or mules until they were displaced by tractors, initially powered by steam and then gasoline. Today the combine is likely to be a self-contained unit and used to harvest other grains besides wheat.

McCormick was not the only person making harvesters. In England, a Daniel Bell had built a reaper as early as 1828, and in the following decades several Americans held patents to various models. But McCormick seems to have done a better job of selling them.



Early model of McCormick's reaper.

He advertised heavily, was among the first to extend credit, to set up a network of sales and service agencies for his products, and to standardize the machine parts. His factory in Chicago was considered one of the most mechanized in the world.

In 1902, his son Cyrus Jr. merged the McCormick company with several others to form International Harvester. It, together with rival John Deere & Co., founded by a 19th-century Illinois plow maker, and Massey-Ferguson Ltd., have

been the industry's leaders, though all have been hurt in recent years by farm recession.

Today, according to Wayne D. Rasmussen, chief historian for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, "with one exception, no major further advances in the mechanization of agriculture are now in sight." That exception is the application of computers to farm management, which in his view "should lead to more efficient management of machines and energy" as well as improved cost-accounting. (Hoyt Gimlin)

make a difference." When he reflected on what he had said, Reagan added, "Well, I can always go back to being a sports announcer."

Jack Warner was furious. He fired off a letter to Reagan offering to cancel "our mutual contractual obligation with respect to the two remaining pictures you are to do with the company."

Reagan expressed displeasure with Warner again for signing Errol Flynn for the leading role in "Ghost Mountain," a film property Reagan had been instrumental in securing for the company as a vehicle for himself.

Ironically, the publicity over the Warner-Reagan rift allowed Reagan the luxury of signing a contract with Universal studios to do five pictures in five years. By the mid-fifties, his film career was essen-

tial and agreed to try a Las Vegas nightclub act. For \$5,500 a week for two weeks, he became a "stand up guy" or host for a variety act at the Last Frontier. Reagan, of course, neither sang nor danced, so he did an opening monologue and an introduction. He quipped that he had notified all his comedian friends to be on guard: "If they say anything funny, it might wind up in my act."

Reagan took to heart the advice of his friend George Burns who believed that "truth is the basis of all good comedy." Reagan managed to draw many laughs during this two week stint on the premise that he had to introduce other people because he had no talent himself.

The entertainment director of the nightclub was impressed with Reagan's film image — he was

and important comment that would presage Reagan's success not only in television but eventually in politics.

A second reviewer claimed that Reagan managed to blend "a confident, pleasing personality with excellent material," and proved to be "a capable story-teller in the role of the Revue's master of ceremonies. Working easily with the acts on the bill, he scored nicely as he joined the Honey Brothers in their 'Jesse James' bit, plus cutting capers with the Continentals in a vaudeville routine."

The act was very popular and Reagan received offers from nightclubs all over the country. But Ron and Nancy had no love for gambling, smoking, drinking, and late hours. "I'm sure by most standards we're probably considered squares," said Nancy, "and, frankly, I'm happy to be one. We're not nightclub people."

Later that same year, Reagan signed a lucrative and fruitful contract with General Electric to act as a smooth, charming host for "General Electric Theater" and to make a series of speeches for the company. From there to California Governor to President of the United States, Reagan has continued to score as nice guy who could always deliver a one-liner effortlessly. Las Vegas served him well.

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